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Don't Play It Again, Sam

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It was only a matter of time before a Bourdieuan discovered musical auditions. In biographical accounts of musical careers, whatever the genre, successful auditions for major professional gigs are frequently identified as decisive turning points; it would take very little to cast them as formalized bids for position-taking in the field of cultural production. However, in “Mastering the Jazz Standard”, Erik Nylander avoids this unimaginative argument, which amounts to little more than a simple variation on a familiar tune. Instead he seizes on auditions for admission to music schools, which allowed him to create a medley of Bourdieu’s greatest hits. Social reproduction, the autonomization of the cultural field, the *doxa*, habitus, and the charismatic ideology are woven together into an impressive counterpoint; the twist comes in how Lucien Karpik’s economic sociology, as well as Boltanski and Thévenot’s “regimes of worth”, are brought into the mix.

While Nylander might have brought in some new material, the well-worn refrains kept coming back. Jury members are not experts, they are “gatekeepers”; their task is not to identify pupils with the most potential but to “guard” the jazz tradition and select their “heirs”. Only those with the right background can navigate the minefield that is the auditioning process; what the jurors recognize is not talent but inherited capital, which gets dressed up in a mystical discourse about the “heroic” or “inspirational” personality. A less imaginative analyst might have settled for revealing how the myth of the rarity of talent justifies exclusion, but Nylander goes for a bigger finish; these “ineffable notions of uniqueness and singularity” allow artistic evaluation to “evade bureaucratic and political principles of justification”.

Other readers might admire Nylander for having mastered the standard Bourdieuan account, but those seeking a more cultural argument will have trouble getting past the sour notes.

My critique will focus on three fundamental weaknesses before outlining an alternative approach to this rich and important topic.

The first weakness in Nylander's analysis stems from his treatment of musical value. As a Bourdieuan, he rejects the idea that artistic judgments are achieved by marshalling specialized knowledge or that they demand particular competencies; neither does he accept that those judgments presuppose an objective framework through which they can be exercised.

Accordingly, his aim is first to reveal the falsely-naturalized criteria that inform judgments and then to show how the determination of value only serves to reinforce an existing structure of privilege. This position drives the methodological strategy of operationalized suspicion. The priority is to find discrepancies between what jurors say and what they do; when Nylander does pay attention to what jurors say, either *in situ* or in an interview setting, it is to reveal the "underlying hierarchies" hidden in their musical discourse.

This "watchdog" role, in which the sociologist sniffs out the "uncritical and unreflective assumptions about the music itself" – or in this case how it should be performed – has been heralded as one of the key contributions of our discipline in the study of contemporary popular music (Prior 2011). But this watchdog has more bark than bite. The approach falls prey to the same "performative contradiction" of which Habermas accused Foucault; the "view from nowhere" assumed in order to propose a disinterested description of evaluation depends on an epistemological presumption (i.e., the suspicion of universalist claims) that cannot be sustained. It inevitably becomes a "view from everywhere" because its challenge to the valorization of certain musical qualities gives into an absurd form of pluralism; when everything is valued equally, nothing is valued at all. Ultimately, a critique that cannot account for its own normative foundation amounts to little more than arbitrary partisanship.

A second weakness arises from the conceptualization of musicality as a form of habitus. Drawing selectively from interview data, Nylander divides musical performance into profane and sacred aspects. Melody, harmony and rhythm are lumped together into “rule-following procedures”; these mere “technical skills” are deemed profane because it is presumed that they can be taught. What is sacralized are the “abstract qualities” that resist codification; these romantic notions of inspired originality and personal expression are held to constitute artistic singularity. With this dichotomy in place, Nylander goes on to identify three types of candidate: the most common are the *epigones* who can do no more than follow the rules and are usually eliminated for that reason; more unusual are the *heretics* who disqualify themselves from the game by flouting or showing ignorance of the rules; but the rarest are the “heroic personalities” who can transcend the rules because they have a “feel for the game”.

It is a typically Bourdieuan move; by inventing the category of “rule-following procedures”, musical performance becomes another mode of unconsciously strategic action. But there are two problems with this category. The first is that it confuses technical facility (the execution of songs on a musical instrument or with the voice) with knowledge of music theory (the understanding of how songs are put together). The latter is tested in auditions when the candidates take the role of band leader. Arranging songs requires some familiarity with harmony, style and instrumentation. For all its shortcomings Becker’s (1982) term, “convention”, is more suitable here; for example, the “rules” of harmony in jazz’s adaptation of functional tonality serve more as guidelines for creating chord progressions (changes) and crafting the voice leading in accompaniment figures and melodic lines so that the result is both idiomatic and pleasing to the ear. This sort of music-analytical ability is demonstrated in a different way in the candidate’s performance through the motivic and rhythmic variations spun out in improvised solos.

Knowledge of these compositional techniques is quite different from the “technique” that refers to complex physical co-ordination and command of the musical instrument. Singing or playing higher, faster and louder than everyone else has very little to do with rule-following procedures, which brings us to Nylander’s second mistake; a superb technique is anything but profane. Virtuosity is thought to be unrelated to musicality, and yet it can inspire just as intense an admiration; even hardened professionals cannot deny the excitement of witnessing a young musician navigate a fiendishly difficult piece with ease. Musicality is neither the only ineffable quality nor the sole form of heroism in the artistic world. The virtuoso is often described through superhuman and supernatural metaphors along with a charismatic mythology that comes in at least two versions; one revolves around demonic pacts (e.g., the Robert Johnson crossroads myth) but the other is a triumph narrative in which the obstacle overcome is the conservatism of the academy (Mitchell 2000).

The combination of these two mistakes compromises the upshot of Nylander’s argument. He wants to present the romantic discourse of jazz entry – the notion of the player that is “free from all structural constraints and as an expression of idiosyncratic personality” – as the “*doxic* principle of artistic valuation”. But for this romantic discourse to perform its ideological function, it must be partial and watered down. The “idiosyncratic personality” bears some resemblance to the Longinian notion of genius, an idea that took shape in the first century AD but was reformulated several times over the course of Western music history (Kivy 2001). This concept of genius resonated with eighteenth-century theories of art as expression because it describes a powerful figure capable of communicating “weighty thoughts” and imparting to the audience a “nobility of mind” that they themselves do not possess (Kivy 2001:16). But while the Longinian genius *makes* the rules, Nylander’s “idiosyncratic personality” just knows how to

manipulate them. In the place of the “man of spirit” who is in “command of full-blooded ideas” (Kivy 2001:15), we find the candidate who can win the “selection game” because he knows how to play the good hand he has been dealt from a loaded deck. The rules of entry into the jazz field are thereby revealed to be a rigged game and a despicable racket. Never mind that another image of genius lurks in the “sayings” of the musicians interviewed. A Bourdieuan could never find the Platonic image of genius even when it stares him in the face because in this conception, strategy is irrelevant; the central idea is that there is no rule-governed method or act of will that can produce a great idea nor, as is more relevant here, an inspired performance. Training is necessary, but not sufficient. Artistic creation happens *to* the artist; it is not something that can be controlled (Kivy 2001:11).

This is not the only respect in which Nylander mishandles his data. The paper is presented as a “study of *the* audition” (emphasis added) and yet it is never established whether the two folk high schools he observed were running typical jazz auditions. How common is it for students to participate in the audition process, both as jury members and as players in the “comp band” assembled for the occasion? At more advanced levels of jazz education, does only one faculty member sit on the jury? Is the numeric grading system a standard procedure mandated by the organization? If “comp bands” are also assembled for conservatory auditions, are they also permitted to transform the interaction into a kind of musical hazing ritual where they either intimidate or make fun of weaker players? It would be surprising to find all these practices at higher levels or in the professional world; it is doubtful that they are widely adopted in the formalized entry procedures of other musical genres. But it is on the basis of these very practices that he is able to characterize auditions as occasions to train the next generation of gatekeepers. Also, these innocents are the ones who provide the best evidence for the audition as selection

game because they have yet to learn “what to listen for, how to listen for it, and how to valorize and verbalize what they have heard”. It is students who argue over the boundaries of “legitimate expressions”, and it is the student juror who expresses some awareness (and guilt) about the advantage gained with inherited capital. We must take on faith that the reason why these issues might not come up with the professionals is because they are fully under the sway of the *illusio*.

Despite these weaknesses, Nylander’s study succeeds in highlighting the complexity of artistic evaluation and correctly identifies the “structural ambiguity” of auditions as the issue demanding sociological explanation. If we were to approach these from a performance perspective (Alexander 2004; McCormick 2006), we could overcome the limitations of an economic framework and analyze auditions as “dramatic events” on two levels. On the micro-level of interaction, the ambiguity would be traced to the definition of the situation. Auditions are high-stress occasions, not just because they provide the decisive moment in which all the hours of practicing and preparation are put to the test. Like competitions, they are also infelicitous occasions because the artificial setting is designed to problematize “dramatic realization” (Goffman 1959); the musician performs for the purpose of being judged but in conditions that are significantly different from those they would encounter should they be selected. Auditions for professional orchestras provide a particularly striking example. Depending on the instrument, candidates might be asked to prepare some solo pieces but the core of the audition consists of excerpts from the standard orchestral repertoire. If it were not strange enough to perform these selections unaccompanied and out of context, candidates must also play them on demand from behind a screen.

Regardless of the genre, what makes the musical interaction in auditions peculiar is the absence of audience members. Everyone who attends to listen is there to judge, an arrangement

which makes it more difficult for the musician to experience “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1991) or to achieve “fusion” (Alexander 2004). Musicians are not being over-sensitive when they take artistic evaluations personally; musical performance is necessarily also a social performance. More to the point, as Auslander (2006:102) has argued, “what musicians perform first and foremost is not the music, but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae.” It is not just the celebrities of the music world who adopt personae on and off stage; the dutiful accompanist and the dependable orchestral “team player” require the same sort of impression management. The choice of musical works and their execution serve this persona by providing the musical and the visual means of symbolic production.

Following Auslander we can say that in auditions for music schools, what the jurors are evaluating is not only the level of musical proficiency that candidates have achieved, but also the personae they have chosen to project. These personae can be meaningful to the extent that they embody the images of genius discussed above; but they are also relevant to the juror’s decision because they can be seen to indicate what the candidate will be like as a pupil. This helps to explain why potential was a recurring theme in Nylander’s interviews and why the candidate’s character was so central to artistic evaluation. For example, candidates took themselves out of the running if they appeared “too aggressive” by “taking up too much space” or “driving everyone else over”. By contrast, candidates who seemed “genuine”, communicative, “confident” yet responsive and flexible enough to “respond to cues” gave the impression that they were both good musicians and good students.

At the macro-level, we would trace the structural ambiguity to a contradiction between cultural structures. Like competitions, auditions reveal the fundamental incompatibility between the aesthetic and civil spheres. Both occasions are designed to give eligible candidates an equal

chance. But the end result is a ranking that separates winners and losers and this disjunctive effect runs contrary to the communicative union that is held to be the aim of musical performance. It is the jurors who must negotiate this incongruity. While they might understand musical experience to be subjective in nature and value the affective quality of performance, their bureaucratic mandate is to eliminate the majority of candidates in an efficient and consistent manner. Rationalized voting systems are increasingly adopted because they are believed to be fair and objective. But while educational institutions in democratic societies are pressured to live up to these ideals, the aesthetic sphere is ultimately concerned with beauty and truth, and these resist quantification.

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